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ABSTRACT

This study explored what children talk about when they watch television as a means of learning more about how and why children verbally encode information. Preschool and third-grade children watched four animated television programs that varied in amount of dialog (one high-dialog, two moderate, and one no-dialog). Their comments while viewing were transcribed and coded in 13 categories for TV-related content and eight categories for non-TV content. The children talked and made more comments about the TV program during the no-dialog show. TV-related comments were also qualitatively different for the no-dialog show as compared to the shows with dialog. Further studies are being planned to explore the possibility that the effects of no dialog may be related to the familiarity and redundancy of content. (Author/MER)

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What Children Talk About While They Watch Television

by

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Abstract: Preschool and third-grade children watched four animated television programs that varied in amount of dialog (1 high dialog, 2 moderate, and 1 no dialog). Their comments while viewing were transcribed and coded for content: 13 categories of TV-related content and 8 categories of Non TV-content. The children talked more and made more comments about the TV program during the no-dialog show. The TV-related comments also were qualitatively different for the no-dialog show compared to the shows with dialog. The effects of no dialog may be related to the familiarity and redundancy of content. Further studies are planned to explore the possibility.

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WHAT CHILDREN TALK ABOUT WHILE THEY WATCH TV

by Mabel Rice

As children interact with their environment, they have many opportunities to comment upon any of the many bits of real-world information available to them. Yet young children do not talk about all aspects of their environment; instead, they selectively talk about certain things. For example, Nelson (1973, p. 31) observed that children first learn the names of things they can act upon. The selectivity of children's comments implies the influence of mental processes that intervene between children's perceptions and experiences and their verbal encoding of that information. For example, Greenfield and her colleagues (Greenfield, 1979, Greenfield and Zukow, 1978) postulate that at the earliest stages of language acquisition children choose the element of the situation that is most informative to them and encode it in speech. Selective attention to change, variability and novelty are proposed as mental processes of particular significance for determining what children are likely to talk about (Pea, 1979; Greenfield, 1979, 1980).

These same mental processes have also been linked to children's processing of one particular feature of the environment, television. It has recently attracted the interest of researchers who are concerned with how children perceive (e.g., Anderson and Levin, 1976), process information (e.g., Collins, et. al., 1978), and come to comprehend symbolically presented material (e.g., Salomon, 1979).

What children have to say during their viewing experiences has been largely overlooked by both the child language and television researchers, with the exception of a few studies where children were interviewed for their general impressions of television (e.g., Streicher and Bonney, 1974). Yet television

is an environmental stimulus with a number of research advantages for learning more about how and why children verbally encode information: It is a source of environmental information available and appealing to most children; literally the same information is presented to all viewers; it is possible to replicate naturalistic viewing experiences within controlled observational settings; television stimuli are like real-world experiences in that they are packaged in a stream of complex bundles of co-occurring features, yet in the case of television it is possible to carefully describe what the child experiences and to link the TV information with the child's responses. To the extent that children process televised information in much the same way as other everyday situations (a conclusion of Anderson's (1979)), we can generalize from the TV-viewing situation to other experiences the child chooses to verbally encode.

The study reported here explored what children talk about when they watch TV, as a means of inferring the features of children's viewing environments that elicit their verbal comments, and the probable mental processing associated with the comments. The questions were: when children are watching television, do they talk about TV events or their own play activities? What aspects of television programs elicit verbal comments? What mental processes are implicated; for example, do children imitate the verbalizations presented on TV? Do children talk about what is uncertain to them, what is new and unexpected, as Greenfield argues is true at the earliest stages of language use?

Two age groups were investigated: 16 preschoolers (4-5 year-olds) and 22 third-graders (ages 8 and 9). They watched four animated 7-minute shows that differed in amount of dialog (one show had no dialog, two shows had moderate amounts, and one had a high frequency of dialog). The children watched in same-sex pairs, while they were also free to pursue other play activities, such as coloring and drawing. Their comments while viewing were transcribed

and coded for content categories that are described briefly in Table 1 of your hand-out. The categorization system describes 21 different kinds of content, subdivided into TV-related (13 categories) and non-TV related (8 categories). The mean reliability of observer agreement was 84% for 14 different transcripts representing 10 different pairs of children and all four shows.

The data were analyzed by computing the frequency of utterances within each category for each viewing of each pair. The frequencies were summed across the 19 pairs to yield means for each category for each of the four different shows.

The results are reported in Tables 2 and 3 of your hand-out. It is clear that the four TV shows differed in the total number of verbalizations and the number of TV-related comments elicited from the children (see Table 2). The children made the most comments about the TV program when viewing the program with no dialog. This impression is supported by a 2(age) X 4(shows) repeated measures analysis of variance, with the number of TV-related comments as a dependent variable. There was a main effect for repeated measures ($p < .001$), and a repeated measures X age interaction ($p < .05$). The tendency to talk more about the TV content when dialog was absent was even more pronounced among the third-graders than the preschoolers (see Table 3).

These results are not a simple artifact of the children listening and therefore not talking during the presence of dialog. That is, the findings can be viewed from two perspectives: more talking when there is no dialog or less talking when dialog is present. One might assume that the children didn't talk during shows with dialog because they were listening. However, notice in Table 2 that the total number of comments (TV-related plus non-TV related) was second highest in the high dialog show. Children tended to talk to each other often during a 7-minute show with a lot of dialog. Presumably the

children talked during the presence of dialog. Evidently they weren't attending to the show, a conclusion supported by the fact that most of their comments were not about what was happening on television.

Another finding was that the TV-related comments were qualitatively different for the no-dialog show compared to the shows with dialog. There were more descriptions of actions and events (such as, "It's gonna blow up over there"), more emotional/self-referenced comments (such as "I like this"), more questions about program content, (such as "Did he hide that thing?"), more statements of knowledge of recurrent program themes (such as "He always does that") for the no-dialog program than for any of the other three.

Incidentally, there were very few directly imitative responses for any of the shows. It is clear that direct imitation is not a mental process implicated in the verbal responses of children viewing TV who are four years of age or older.

The findings reveal that when children watch animated cartoons while they have opportunities to play with each other, they do talk about the TV events as well as their own activities. The tendency to talk about the program was most striking for the program without dialog. Furthermore, the children's comments about the no-dialog show followed distinctive patterns; they tended to talk about the actions and events of the program, the familiar, predictable aspects of the events, along with a number of affective statements, such as "Oh, I like this part."

The results have relevance for the question of what features of the speech situations determine what children will say, and what mental processes are implicated. The findings can be compared with Greenfield's (1979;1980) conclusion that children at the earliest stages of language use talk about what they attend to, and they attend to what is uncertain, that is, what

changes, or is novel. That interpretation is partially supported by these data.

The children did talk about the actions and events of the programs and these are features that control their visual attention while viewing TV (Anderson, et al, in press). This finding supports Greenfield's (1979) assertion that "principles of selective attention become principles of selective word use." (p. 1).

However, one finding is at odds with the existing accounts of what features influence what children talk about. The children focused on the familiar, predictable aspects of events, instead of the uncertain, variable components. The children talked about what was already known instead of what was new; they established their common information, what was known to each of them, instead of describing the uncertainties or new aspects of the programs.

The tendency to talk about the familiar seemed to be a function of the plot of the particular no-dialog show used in this study. It happens to be highly repetitive and consists almost entirely of simple actions between two main characters, e.g., one character chasing another, one character always falling off cliffs, one character planting various devices to trap or injure the other character. Futhermore, the show is very popular, so the characters and themes are familiar to many children. The simplicity, repetitiveness, and familiarity of the plot, along with the repeated actions, combine to produce stimuli which are well within the preschool child's ability to describe, to predict, to respond emotionally, and comment upon. In this case, the lack of dialog may have interacted with the nature of the content in influencing the children's proclivity to talk about that particular show.

The questions that immediately follow are: how do each of these three factors, i.e., presence or absence of dialog, redundancy of plot and familiarity

of characters, contribute to the effect? Which ones or combinations determine children's tendency to verbally encode the environmental information? Is there evidence of a developmental shift in underlying mental processing, i.e., with increasing age and experience do children tend to move from verbally encoding what is uncertain and personally informative to talking about what is familiar and predictable?

One advantage of studying children viewing television is that it is possible to experimentally separate the various factors. Studies designed to do just that are in the preliminary stages now. Our understanding of the features of the communication situation that determine what children choose to verbally encode, and the underlying mental processes involved, will be enhanced by broadening our consideration of all features of a child's environment, including television.

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Table 1

Categories of Verbalization

TV Content

1. Identification
   a. Name of show
   b. Labeling objects or characters
   c. Having seen it before
   d. Announcing the end

2. Describing actions and events
   a. Past
   b. Present
   c. Future

3. Describing characters

4. Self-referenced: emotional/subjunctive
   a. Empathic, e.g., "ouch", "oh, no"
   b. Exhortations to TV characters, e.g., "don't"
   c. Personal preference or judgment, e.g., "I like this", "This is silly"
   d. Subjunctive, e.g., "I would have grabbed on, wouldn't you?"
   *e. Empathic vocalization, e.g., ooo-ooo-ooo, ohh-ohh

5. Imitation
   a. Dialogue
   *b. Audio special effects (noises)

6. General TV comments, e.g., "I've never watched cartoons this early, have you?"

7. Directing other child's attention to TV, e.g., "Look!"

*8. Laughter/humor
   a. Laughs
   b. Snickers

9. Questions
   a. Program content, e.g., "Did that say go?", "Do you think a monster's in there?"
   b. Other's opinion of program

10. Statements of knowledge of recurrent program themes, e.g., "He always just been running", "RR can run real fast", "cuz he wants to eat him', "cuz he's too fast"

11. Confirmation of other's comments, e.g., "right", "oh", "huh", "yeh"

12. Unintelligible

13. Other

Non-TV Content

1. Drawing activities

2. Physical surroundings
   a. Directing attention of other child
   b. Describing/commenting

3. Experimental procedures/personnel

*4. Laughter/humor
   a. Laughs
   b. Snickers

5. Interpersonal affective, e.g., "I like you"

6. Persons or events nor present

7. Confirmation of other's comments, e.g., "oh yeh"

8. Other

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* Datamyte scoring

Table 2

Verbalizations per TV Program: Means

	Program 1: No Dialogue	Program 2: Moderate dialogue	Program 3: Moderate dialogue	Program 4: High dialogue
TV-related utterances per program across pairs	26.42	12.32	9.79	7.05
Non-TV related utterances per program across pairs	14.63	10.21	13.32	20.89
Unintelligble comments	3.74	2.16	2.37	3.00
Totals	44.79	24.68	25.47	30.95

Table 3

Preschoolers' vs. Third Graders' Comments for No-Dialog Show: Means

	Preschool	Third
TV-related utterances	19.13	31.72
Non-TV related utterances	16.75	13.09